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Question1: Commodity policy should be restructured to reward those farmers who care for their land, and who provide public benefits in the protection of natural resources, wildlife habitat and open space. This would involve a shift away from current policies that promote high levels of production of certain crops and take other land out of production to control oversupply. Instead, policies should encourage conservation and protection of working land while producing a diverse range of crops for local markets. This approach will allow the land prices to reflect agricultural market value. Production subsidies and land retirement programs may inflate the price of land beyond the reach of small to mid-sized owner-operators, whether beginning farmers or established operations. Land should be priced so that farmers have the opportunity to own most of their own land. This will require changes to the commodity programs so that rental and land rates are not artificially high. It will also require government commitment to expand and fully fund beginning farmer and rancher programs.

I am currently a graduate student in Crop Science at Washington State University, and I would eventually like to farm, although the probability that I will be able to start a farm on my own is small, since my grandparents' farm was sold some years ago. Government programs that would help people like me include efforts to link retiring farmers with new farmers interested in taking over an existing farm, and support for farmers starting a new farm from the ground up. These should be tied to conservation programs, especially cost-share and technical assistance in installing and maintaining necessary conservation practices. The Conservation Security Program (CSP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) both have some preferential cost-share arrangements for beginning farmers and ranchers, and these should be maintained. Research into sustainable practices and innovative marketing will also help the next generation of farmers. Farmer-led research and demonstration projects are one of the most effective ways to share successful practices with other farmers. Every effort should be made to focus assistance on farms and ranches that are small to mid-sized for the region and which are operated by the owners. Most farmers do not want to be dependent on the government for their profits, and this is a deterrent to prospective new farmers. Collaborative projects focusing on farm profitability, rural development and sustainable agricultural practices will lead to a higher quality of life for farmers which will attract young people looking for a rewarding profession.

Question2: Becoming increasingly competitive in the global marketplace is not necessarily essential to farm economic growth. Fair trade and fair competition in domestic markets will be far more important to farm profitability both in the US and abroad. The current policy of free trade at any cost is hurting farmers in the US and primarily benefiting

large corporate trading entities. A few firms control most of the grain traded internationally, and this puts independent farmers everywhere at the mercy of the oligopoly if the primary markets for agricultural products are foreign. More emphasis should be placed on regional production, processing and marketing; rebuilding the infrastructure that has been dismantled over the past half-century. We need policy that supports small businesses, including farms. The role of the USDA should be to make sure that these owner-operated farms and businesses are able to remain competitive in the domestic and international economy. You need to take a hard look at who truly benefits from the current structure of subsidies and regulations. It's fine to talk about supporting the family farm and developing a new generation of farmers, but all signs point to further consolidation and rural decline. The government should work for its citizens, not for corporations.

The wheat breeding program where I'm doing my graduate studies works with many farmers across Eastern Washington. At a recent discussion with 20 or so farmers, one made the point that when he took over his family's farm in 1980, the USDA still seemed to be there to help farmers, but that has changed, and now the USDA feels like the enemy, from the local to the national level. This was not because of regulations, but because of policies that supported large farms and corporations at the expense of rural communities and independent farmers. It is time to ditch the 'get big or get out' mentality and really start supporting America's farm and ranch families. There should be payment limitations and overall caps on trade-distorting subsidies. These should be enforced and written without loopholes. At the same time, the government should strengthen its support for non-trade-distorting subsidies such as green payment programs like CSP. Payments should be tied to farm operators who are real people, not corporations. In addition, contract farming should be more strictly regulated, with a ban on mandatory arbitration clauses, captive livestock supplies, and unfair practices that do not let farmers negotiate as equals with the contracting corporation. There needs to be true competition in our domestic markets, and industry domination by a few large firms in each processing and input market prevents this. Country of origin labeling (COOL) is another facet of fair trade and fair competition, and should be required for all agricultural products. It is unclear why there has been such a long delay in the implementation of COOL, as it would help farmers in the US since most people want to support US producers when they have the information to make that choice.

Research programs will also keep US agriculture competitive and viable, but they must be relevant to farmers. This includes research on production practices that protect natural resources while maintaining or increasing net economic returns, research to reestablish the link between agriculture, nutrition and health, and strategies for processing and marketing that allow farmers to capture a greater share of the food dollar. Research that is collaborative with innovative farmers will ensure relevance, and grant programs such as the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program deserve a much higher proportion of research funding. The Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems (IFAFS), which existed for a few years was also very good and it is unfortunate that its funding was redirected. There is a need for long-term systems research and plant breeding for agriculture in the future, and right now there is no stable source of funding for these efforts. Programs such as CSP that encourage on-farm research and demonstration projects should have the full support of the administration. There will not be one solution to the many problems facing agriculture, and encouraging innovative farmers is the best way

to develop solutions that fit each region and farming system.

Question3: Farm policy should be designed to reward producers who care for their land and provide nutritious food instead of encouraging overproduction. Please see my responses to questions 1 and 2 as well. I agree that program incentives lead to increased production and lower market prices for farmers. The current commodity programs maintain high production volumes of certain commodities, at the expense of more nutritious or higher value crops. This primarily benefits companies who can buy cheap commodities for livestock feed or for processing, adding value so that the end product is not cheap on the retail market. With the rising trend of obesity, we need to question whether we can afford to continue promoting an oversupply of these raw materials, instead of promoting the production of fresh foods for regional markets. Farmers get a very low share of the food dollar and this is a result of policies that encourage overproduction of a few commodities, and then make up the difference between the market price and the target price, basically using tax dollars to subsidize low commodity prices for processing companies. Net farm income has not benefited from most of the commodity policies of recent years. There needs to be significant reform, including but not limited to strict caps on the payments a single farm entity can receive. Payments should be scale neutral, not tied to production but instead to the protection of natural resources and other public goods such as nutritious food.

Question4: Support for stewardship and conservation should be the future of farm support payments. USDA should adopt policies that promote whole farm planning as a first step to conservation programs. This plan could lead farmers to the correct conservation program for their needs, especially preparing them for the conservation security program. CSP should be the capstone program for farmers who have shown a commitment to addressing the major resource concerns on their farm or ranch. It should be open to all eligible producers, without a ranking system or rotating watershed scheme. There is a need to simplify the conservation programs so that navigating the programs and doing the paperwork for each is not so difficult. It seems that there are three main purposes that conservation programs should fulfill. The first is to encourage farmers to adopt and maintain conservation practices on working lands. CSP is designed for this goal. The second is to help producers correct environmental problems, which is what EQIP is supposed to do. There need to be payment limitations on EQIP and restrictions on project eligibility so that taxpayers do not continue to subsidize the construction or expansion of Confined Animal Feeding Operations, which are an environmental problem in themselves. There is a backlog of producers waiting for EQIP contracts, and dividing the money more equitably makes sense. The third purpose of conservation programs is to protect farmland and fragile lands. The conservation reserve, grasslands reserve, wetlands reserve and farm and ranchland protection programs fall into this category. Fragile and sensitive lands should be taken out of production, but not whole farms. Whole farms should be enrolled in farmland protection programs that prohibit development so that our agricultural capacity is not paved over. Development may appear to be the highest and best use of the land in the minds of some economists, but if we as a nation cannot produce enough food to feed our population, we become even more vulnerable than we are relying on other nations for our energy. It is vitally important to stop the loss of prime farmland and to be better stewards of the land as we use it to fulfill our basic needs.

Question5: If the changes suggested above for restructuring commodity and conservation programs are implemented, the economies of rural communities will become stronger. Not only will many diverse, family-owned farms and ranches increase the population of rural

communities, but they will increase the economic opportunities for independent processors, retailers, and farm input suppliers.

Concentration and consolidation in agribusiness has drained the capital from rural areas. New technologies may be part of the solution, but attracting a factory or other manufacturing facility will not sustain rural economies for long, especially with growing competition from foreign countries with lower labor costs. Rural economies, and the US economy in general, needs to become more self-supporting, with local businesses owned and operated by local people so dollars spent in the community stay circulating in that community longer. Rural development programs such as the value-added producer grant program and the small business innovation grants should be expanded, as should technical assistance and grants for rural cooperatives and entrepreneurs.

Regulations on food related businesses are often not appropriate for small-scale operations and are an entrance barrier for new processing facilities. These should be reevaluated for small businesses. Other programs such as the farmers' market promotion program seek to expand direct marketing opportunities for farmers (all direct marketing, not just farmers' markets) and could be a catalyst for the development of local markets for farmers across the country. All rural development programs do not need to be agriculturally based, but we should certainly not divorce agriculture and rural development goals, as they are still interlinked in many ways.

Question6: Research should be directed at problems of real importance to US agriculture. This includes the things listed in the explanation of question 6, and should also include long-term research that will enhance our understanding of agricultural systems and how to make the transition to more sustainable farming practices. Product quality and new attributes; organic and specialty crops; value-added products, biobased energy crops and new uses for existing crops can all be addressed using classical breeding methods, yet federal funding for plant and animal breeding is dwindling. Public sector capacity to respond to emerging disease threats, new markets and production challenges has been eroded to the point where many crops have fewer than 10 breeders in both the private and public sectors combined. This situation will severely constrain the ability of US agriculture to adapt to new situations and market demands. Even with cutting edge basic research on genetics, there will still be a need for plant breeders to deploy these technologies in the field. The focus on genetic engineering and genomic technologies has taken resources away from the more applied (and no less scientific) fields of plant breeding and agricultural systems. For many production systems, the absence of plant breeders is already affecting yields and farmers' ability to choose seeds and breeds suitable for their environment. Research on organic systems and breeding for these systems is particularly needed, as it benefits organic farmers, those considering transitioning to organic production, and those who simply want to lower their input costs.

USDA should show stronger support for long-term applied research like plant breeding, and grant programs should encourage collaboration with farmers, non-profit groups and small businesses. Expanded basic and applied research would be nice, as the agricultural research budget has remained stagnant for many years. The National Research Initiative (NRI) has grown slightly, but much of its funding goes to basic research on Arabidopsis and other model systems and is of little use to farmers. Support for SARE and IFAFS-like programs should be increased. In these programs, research is farmer-driven, multidisciplinary and spans the field from the molecular to the landscape level. Marketing research is also needed, particularly for the development of markets where farmers receive a fair return for their labor and investment. This includes

domestic and foreign markets, and should be geared to enhancing the profitability of small and mid-sized family farms.

Biobased energy crops have received a lot of attention lately because of the need to become less dependent on foreign oil. This is good, but research should be focused on non-edible crops and agricultural wastes rather than on finding an alternative use for surplus corn and soybeans. Cellulosic ethanol and biodiesel from true oilseed crops like mustards have much promise. The development of on-farm refineries so that farmers could grow their own fuel could dramatically improve the bottom line of every farm in the country. Perennial crops like switchgrass could serve multiple purposes by protecting soil and water resources, providing wildlife ha